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Religious Groups Oppose FBI, CIA Clergy Contacts

By John Novotney
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The American religious community is protesting Carter administration proposed charters which would allow the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency to use clerics as undercover agents or informants.

Legislation to create an FBI charter specifically authorizes the Bureau to solicit clergymen, journalists, attorneys and physicians to act as informers.

The National Intelligence Act of 1980, introduced earlier this month in the Senate, does not prohibit "voluntary contacts" or the "voluntary exchange of information" by "any person and any entity of the intelligence community" with "any U.S. religious organization," among others.

This bill would affect all U.S. agencies involved in intelligence gathering, including the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency.

Current CIA guidelines prohibit the paid or unpaid use of clerics as informers or undercover agents, but, this can be waived at the discretion of the CIA director.

Furthermore, the National Intelligence Act of 1980 would permit the president to waive the provision prohibiting CIA agents from posing as clerics, journalists, and so on, "during any period in which the U.S. is engaged in a war declared by an act of Congress."

The executive committee of the National Council of Churches, an umbrella-group of 32 Protestant and Orthodox denominations, has opposed the recruitment, employment or impersonation of missionaries, members of the clergy or church workers by members of intelligence agencies.

Rev. Dean Kelley of the NCC said

"The churches have been especially concerned about the misuse of their clergy for law-enforcement purposes by federal intelligence agencies."

But, he said, "In asking that the churches and their employees be placed 'off limits' for the FBI as informants, we do not wish to imply or suggest that they are otherwise 'outside the law' or relieved of the general responsibility of all citizens to uphold the laws and to assist in the prevention of crime and the apprehension of criminals. . . .

"All that is sought here," he said, "is to rule out the use by the FBI, or even the appearance of use, of the church or church workers as instruments of law enforcement."

Rev. John Adams of the United Methodist Church's Board of Church and Society, said "As a clergyman, I want you to know that no violation of an ordinance, no exploitation of a pastoral relationship and no flexible

phrasing of any proposed legislation can possibly justify or provide an ethical basis for the intrusion of intelligence forces upon the confidences which are shared within the spiritual context."

William Thompson, stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., expressed "deepest concern" regarding provisions of the proposed charter allowing FBI agents to solicit clerics as informants or undercover agents.

"The confidentiality of communications with the clergy, whether in the confessional or at the counseling desk, must be maintained if the minister, priest or rabbi is to be able to perform the religious and spiritual functions required by the community of faith of that person," he said.